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ABSTRACT

Within the field of black rhetoric, preaching has a significant position. In the days of slavery, a sense of humor and religion allowed slaves to release suppressed emotions in ways that did not offend. The functions of the black church and its preaching include providing adult education, creating social roles, being a news medium, and offering a place to develop leadership. Black sermons are not written in manuscript form, tend to be based on the hereafter, begin by touching the deep emotions of the audience, often include an extended description or re-creation of a Bible story, and have an emotional climax that may be tearful or ecstatic. In addition, black preachers usually use contemporary black language, utilize cadence including occasional intonation or chants, receive responses from the audience during their preaching, and make the service a moving experience. (TJ)

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HOMILETICS OF THE TRADITIONAL BLACK CHURCH

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HOMILETICS OF THE TRADITIONAL BLACK CHURCH

In 1969, the SCA released a new text edited by Dr. Dewitte Holland with the title: Preaching in American History, 1630-1967. This 436 page volume contains 20 essays of various topics in American History and the treatment of these topics from the pulpit.

In the Introduction, the text states:

> American preaching, then, from a substantive point of view has never been adequately described and interpreted, nor has such an analysis ever been attempted, except from restricted sectarian points of view....Preaching as a specialized form of public address has been studied in the speech field for a number of years, and a large body of research findings has accumulated. With rare exceptions, this material lies quite hidden away in university libraries.[1]

Most of this material, however, is concerned with white preachers and white preaching. Very little research, in comparison, is reported on the art and description of or the strategies for Black Preaching. Consequently, comparatively little material on Black Preaching is on the shelves of our university libraries.

This paper attempts to direct attention to this very important and significant domain within the field of Black Rhetoric. Much has been said about the Black Church; much less effort has been focused on Black Preaching. For sure, traditional Black Preaching is NOT simply preaching or sermonizing by blacks. An attempt to identify and describe the underlying qualities and theories of Black Preaching will therefore be made in this paper, thus distinguishing Black Preaching from all other forms of homiletics.

Background

Benjamin Mays, distinguished southern educator and preacher, introduced his text on The Negro's Church with a graphic description of the settlement of the Negro in the New World. He stated that:

> In this strange and somewhat hostile environment (slavery), it became necessary for the Negro to work out for himself a technique of survival. As a part of his early survival tactics, he learned to smile and dance under circumstances that would ordinarily have caused one to frown and possibly to fight. He developed a keen sense of humor, and this enabled him to release suppressed emotions in a way that did not offend, and at the same time carried him through difficult situations.
>
> Possibly the most significant technique of survival developed during the days of slavery might well be called a "religious" technique, which is represented by the Negro spirituals and by the early efforts to establish and develop the Negro Church.
>
> Relatively early the church, and particularly the independent Negro church, furnished the one and only organized field in which the slave's suppressed emotions could be released, and the only opportunity for him to develop his own leadership. In almost every other area, he was completely suppressed. Thus, through a slow and difficult process, often involving much suffering and persecution, the Negro, more than three-quarters of a century prior to emancipation, through initiative, zeal, and ability, began to achieve the right to be free in his church. He demonstrated his ability to preach; and this demonstration convinced both Negroes and Whites that he was possessed of the Spirit of God.[2]

Several authors have suggested varying functions of the Black Church and its preaching:

1. The Negro church is one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest, channel through which the masses of the Negro race receive adult education. Furthermore, a goodly number of Negroes believe what their pastor tells them. He still exercises a dominant influence in the lives of many.[3]

2. The social role of Negro churches is of great importance, especially among the Baptists, the denomination of the masses, whose members are not inclined to develop a distinctive social life in sororities, fraternities, social clubs, or community organizations. No less important is the position of the Baptist minister as the news medium of the community. He is expected to gather the local news and circulate it through his sermons on Sunday. In fact, almost all ministers in southern Negro communities are looked to as the disseminators of information, and the pipeline of the community leads directly to them.

   Born in slavery, weaned in segregation and reared in discrimination, the religion of the Negro folk was chosen to bear roles of both protest and relief.

   From the earliest days, the Negro was much more concerned with the freedom of this world than with the religion of the next. He listened attentively to the religious and moral teachings of the whites, but his mind was elsewhere. He was resourceful enough to perceive that the best way to freedom in this world was through the religion of the whites, sanctioned by his masters and overseers as means of harnessing his energy for production.[4]

3. The Black preacher has always enjoyed the status of being the natural leader of the black community. His leadership role has at times assumed a variety of forms with concomitant responsibilities: pastor or spiritual leader, political leader, social leader, and very often the leading proponent and exemplar of education.[5]

4. In the eyes of my people I am qualified to carry out these functions: race and civic leader, moral instructor, preacher, church builder, labor arbiter, organizational official, promoter of businesses, social and welfare agent, denominational spokesman and educator.[6]

What follows is a description of an early black sermon preached by Reverend Andrew Marshall of the First African Baptist Church at Savannah. He was called to the pulpit at age 67 and served for 44 years (1812-56). This description is by Sir Charles Lyell, a British Geologist who had just returned to England from Georgia.

> The singing was followed by prayers, not read, but delivered without notes by a negro of pure African blood, a gray-headed venerable-looking man, with a fine sonorous voice, named Marshall. He ... concluded by addressing to them a sermon, also without notes, in good style, and for the most part in good English; so much so, as to make me doubt whether a few ungrammatical phrases in the negro idiom might not have been purposely introduced for the sake of bringing the subject home to their family thoughts...he compared it to an eagle teaching her newly fledged offspring to fly, by carrying it up high into the air, then dropping it, and, if she sees it falling to earth,

> darting with the speed of lightning to save it before it reaches the ground...described in animated and picturesque language, yet by no means inflated, the imagery was well calculated to keep the attention of his hearers awake. He also inculcated some good practical maxims of morality...Nothing in my whole travels gave me a higher idea of the capabilities of the negroes, than the actual progress which they have made, even in a part of a slave state...than this Baptist meeting...they were listening to a good sermon, scarcely, if at all, below the average standard of the compositions of white ministers--.[7]

Distinguishing Characteristics of Traditional Black Preaching

The question of establishing a theory or theoretical framework for the study of Black Preaching is a difficult one. Furthermore, the careful study and rhetorical criticism of sermons is equally a difficult task, especially since manuscripts of these sermons are very rarely available. Thus, there are problems that must be identified immediately:

1. Most Black sermons are not prepared in manuscript form;
2. Most Black sermons through the centuries were not and are not tape-recorded;
3. Many preachers are reluctant to release copies for criticism;
4. Since most Black sermons are in dialogue form, manuscripts may not satisfactorily represent what actually took place in the church.

5. There are sermons which in the Black tradition, were not written to be read. Much of the real impact, therefore, is lost unless the critic knows how the words would have sounded, and in his mind pictures the delivery as he reads.

Sermon Types

Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson in one chapter of their text reported on their study of 100 sermons preached by black ministers.

Of the 100 sermons studied, the authors reported that 26 were on life situations (i.e., practical, relating religion to economic, racial and international aspects of life); 54 were other worldly (concerned with the hereafter); and 20 were doctrinal or theological (exposition about the Godhead, etc.).[8] It must be noted that one-half of these sermons concentrated on the hereafter, and the rewards awaiting those who "overcome" in this life. It would be of particular interest if a similar survey were conducted in 1978 in order to determine if Black Preaching today, as opposed to 1930, is more concerned with contemporary life experiences and problems than with the world beyond. A cursory observation of the contemporary pulpit suggests quite a different distribution of sermon types.

Organization

In this study, it was not possible to arrive at a set pattern or sets of patterns of organization in traditional Black Preaching. There were, however, certain styles which appeared rather consistently in the sermons. For example, one finds that black preaching seems to require the speaker to touch the deep emotions of the audience, intimately and intensely, very early in his sermon, possibly in the introduction.

Some preachers chose a short statement of interest prior to presenting the text; some others told humorous stories and thereby relaxed themselves and the audience; still others used an informal style of general comments (unrelated to the prepared sermon) which provided a preliminary introduction. A few preachers invited a soloist or choir to sing while they stood before the congregation, praying, clapping or chanting. In other cases, the minister began with an invocation, or he immediately announced his text.

In all cases, there seemed to be but one purpose, namely: "to establish a situation in which the deep feelings of the preacher and the people may be expressed in a climate of acceptance and faith."[9] Thus, the preacher used the introduction first to present himself (establish credibility and ethos) and then to launch his text. In addition, Mitchell noted that with older traditional black audiences ministers usually cited their texts from the Bible and proceeded with authority and acceptance. In contrast, youthful and more contemporary black audiences required some means "whereby the need for biblical insight is established. Otherwise they could hardly care less about a text."[10]

Appearing quite consistently within the development of the Black sermon is the extended description or re-creation of a Bible story, usually one with which the congregation is already familiar, but which is now repeated with an additional or new insight. Early black preachers, deprived of meaningful education, were forced to elaborate on Bible stories with imagination which would make the story meaningful to their congregations. This phenomenon continues today as Black preachers update the familiar biblical materials to increase the insights of the hearers. Thus, the stories have plots with conflicts and suspense, heroes and villains.

There is enough action and movement to maintain keen interest and to demand attention. The story is therefore re-lived and experienced by the listeners. The following excerpt from a sermon is quoted in Mitchell's text:

> ...Jesus told a story of a man who had perhaps been a bookkeeper for the king, and he stole, he absconded, he misplaced a million or more dollars--it could have been as much as ten million dollars in today's money. I don't know whether he had expensive girlfriends, or played the horses with it or what, but it was gone--all gone! Then one day the king had his books audited and the cover was pulled off. By this time the king was pretty upset. He was hot with that bookkeeper. He called that rascal in and ordered him--his wife and the whole family--to be sold for a small part payment.
>
> But the man stood up in front of the king and pled and cried and pled and just carried on so....Talking 'bout, "Give me a break, I'll pay you every cent." And the king said to himself, "Well, if I did put him in jail, I'd just be feeding him. And there's no way in the world a working man could start to pay the interest, much less pay back the principal; and I could hardly miss the price they'd bring on the slave market. No man in his right mind would ever let him keep books again."
>
> So he let him go--forgave the scoundrel! Happy now, this dude fell down before the king and thanked him and kissed his feet and all that. O happy day!
>
> In no time the bookkeeper went out in the street and he met another servant that owed him a measly two dollars, just enough for one bet on a horse at the racetrack. And the Bible tells us that he grabbed

him by the throat like this (gestures--grabbing both coat lapels with one hand near the throat) and said, "Looka here, man, I want mah money, and I want it now!" The poor fella fell down on his knees and pled for patience. He promised to pay it all just as soon as he could. But the king's ex-bookkeeper wouldn't hear to it at all. He called a sheriff and had his old friend thrown in jail.

One of the king's servants was passing in the meantime and saw the whole thing. He couldn't get to the king fast enough. "Your majesty, you know what? You just gave that rascal a million dollars, and he's out there tryin' to throw his friend in jail for two measly bucks."

Let me tell you, the king got mad. He was furious. He said, "Send him back in here." And when he came in, the king said, "Put him under the jail and throw the key away!" Because you see, the measure that he used on his two-dollar debtor was the same measure that was used on him; only for him it was a lot harder than it was on his friend.

Whatever you use to measure your friends and fellow members, God is gonna send for you to come back and say, "Looka, here, Sister, looka here Brother, if you gonna be this rough, how will it fit on you?"[11]

The Conclusion and the Climax

Much has been said about the climax of the traditionally black sermon, and some commentators suggest that it is a mournful occasion of weeping and shouting.

> ...The Black climax, at its best, is a kind of celebration of the goodness of God and the standing of Black people in his kingdom, as these elements have been expressed in the message.
>
> As celebration, the Black climax is not required to teach or to deal with concepts or to convey facts. Although every Black sermon should teach and enable and empower Black people, the climax consists of a kind of positive reinforcement. The hearer is permitted to relax a bit from reaching after new spiritual insight, and to lift up in confirmation and gratitude what he has already received.
>
> In order to accomplish this, the Black preacher has shifted from objective fact to subjective testimony--from "he said" and "it happened" to "I feel" and "I believe." While middle-class white preachers are admonished to avoid what Henry Sloan Coffin called "ecclesiastical nudism" in the pulpit, Black preachers, in climax, lay bare their souls in symbolic and contagiously free affirmation. The achievement of complete liberty in the spirit affirms the preacher's personhood in a positive, healing catharsis. But his assertion of self in the form of unlimited praise of God is a form of fulfillment in which the whole congregation participates and from which it benefits both vicariously and directly.[12]

Mitchell therefore suggests that the Black climax is truly a celebration, maybe tearful or maybe ecstatic, but it is the high point at which the audience <u>feels</u> the strength of the point of the sermon, embrace it and celebrate it corporately. Black religious culture is emotional, it moves people, changes lives and is therefore meaningful and effective.

Few Americans who heard Dr. Martin Luther King's address at the Lincoln Memorial in August, 1963 will ever forget the strength and forcefulness of the conclusion of his speech. The now famous, "I Have a Dream" has etched its way into the memory, not simply because of logic and reason, but because it aroused the highest emotions and challenged the best fibre in us, to work for an integrated America. Such is the nobility of the climax in the traditional Black sermon climax.

Other Qualities of Black Preaching

Language and Style: Black preachers represent probably every level of academic attainment in American society. Thus language style is varied, usually consistent with educational training. However, the Black preacher, even the most learned, is often less inhibited than his white peer and demonstrates this by his use of contemporary Black language, figures and experiences. He feels he must present the scriptures in the language and culture of the congregation, "the in-language", and so it is not uncommon to hear first person quotations delivered with the so-called grammatical "errors" associated with the community. Consequently, Black English is very common in Black Preaching. The opposite is sometimes detrimental.

> The results have been rather disastrous for the church of the Black masses, because the vast majority of Black-culture churches have found it difficult to understand or relate to trained Black clergymen preaching whiteese to them. Consequently, those trained Blacks who are also fluent in Black English--the language of their people--are conspicuously effective and in great demand.
>
> In fact, it has often been argued by the faithful that those preachers who deliberately tried to

> preach white to their Black congregations were possibly not even "saved".[13]

Thus, linguistic flexibility is a mark of effective Black Preaching. On the other hand, however, the Black congregation responds to the well-turned phrase, and embellished beauty of language.

Cadences

One of the very noticeable skills of the Black Preacher is the use of cadence. This characteristic is probably as prevalent among highly trained Black ministers as it is among the store-front clergy. It is effective and adds a degree of credibility to the speaker. Dr. Martin Luther King's cadences were essentially Black. Despite his formal training and language, his national status and reputation, he was heard as a soul brother, as a down-home Baptist Preacher.

Somewhat related to the above is the intonation or chant sometimes used by Black Preachers.

> Historically speaking, intonation as a factor in Black preaching style no doubt stems from the African custom of singing almost everything. The history of much of Black Africa was preserved, in the absence of writing, in song. So were laws, customs and traditional folk stories and hero tales. There were also highly spontaneous or impromptu songs for various life situations, such as the voicing of grievances. And there were folktales or fables of wisdom and morality, for guidance in life's problems.[14]

Call and Response

It is not uncommon for Black Preachers to pause for a breath and receive responses from their congregations. Of course, some ministers deliberately pause after an important word or phrase, thereby calling for the response. Usually the response is the repetition of the exact word or phrase, or it may be an affirmatory statement such as "oh yes", "Praise God", "Thank You, Jesus", "Have Mercy", etc. This custom of African heritage provides the audience an opportunity to participate and to feedback favorably to the message of the sermon. On occasion, specifically poignant phrases or texts are restated for emphasis and are therefore memorized for later use.

Enjoyment

The Black church service is a moving experience of enjoyment and pleasure. Growing out of the slave experience, the church provided the one and only organized field in which the slave's suppressed emotions could be released. The anticipated joys of heaven, vividly portrayed in words such as "streets of gold", robes, crowns, harps, no more tears, sorrow, pain, but rather a perpetual and eternal state of happiness and bliss, could not be contemplated without the overt release of the emotions and without supreme joy.

Conclusion

Thus worship and the preaching are meant to be joyful. The shared experience thus becomes contagious and the congregation collectively responds to the leadership and communicative skills of the Preacher.

Black Preaching therefore is not simply organization and presentation of religious materials in a lecture style or format. Rather, it is the careful orchestrating of the needs of the congregation, the satisfaction of those needs through carefully selected materials related to the congregation's experiences and presented vividly and descriptively to awaken their highest intellectual ability and touch their deepest emotions, as they look forward with enjoyment to a heaven free from the bigotry, pain, sorrow and death of this world. Such is the true nature of Black Preaching.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Dewitte T. Holland, Preaching in American History, 1630-1967 (New York: Speech Communication Association, 1969), pp. 11-12.

[2]Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, The Negro's Church (New York: Arno Press, 1969), pp. 1,3.

[3]Ibid., p.58.

[4]Joseph R. Washington, Jr., Black Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 2,33.

[5]Henry H. Mitchell, Black Preaching (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), p.6.

[6]Washington, Jr., op. cit., p. 91.

[7]Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., and Benjamin Quarles, The Negro American: A Documentary History (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1967), pp. 135-136.

[8]Mays and Nicholson, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

[9]Mitchell, op. cit., p.186.

[10]Ibid., p.187.

[11]Ibid., pp. 144-146.

[12]Ibid., pp. 188-189.

[13]Ibid., pp. 149-150.

[14]Ibid., p.164.

See also:

James Golden and Richard Rieke, Rhetoric of Black Americans (Columbus: Merrill and Sons, 1970).

Charles V. Hamilton, Black Preacher in America (New York: Morrow and Company, Inc., 1972).

Arthur L. Smith, Rhetoric of Black Revolution (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1969).